

## Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore: Two Contributions to the Romain Rolland Memorial Volume<sup>1</sup>

**Summary:** This article, first published online in 2013, quotes the contributions to the Romain Rolland Memorial Volume published in 1926, provided by Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, complemented with details from the recent book by Chinmoy Guha which gives a full picture of the correspondence between the two major writers of the twentieth century. Some personal insights and comments of this writer, and a few more details from the Rolland Memorial Volume are added. For the present publication I have re-checked the text of the two contributions.

2013 has been, and still continues to be, a remarkable year in Indology: hundred years have passed since Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, and this was an occasion for ICWA in Delhi to organize an international conference to commemorate the poet's merits in May of the same year. Mahatma Gandhi was honoured on the 144th anniversary of his birth in Athens in a joint commemoration by ELINEPA and The Indian Embassy in Athens on 2nd October 2013.

The two Indian patriots were united in various ways, and it is known that Gandhi received his epithet "Mahatma", 'the Great Soul' exactly from Tagore. Their cooperation, similarities and differences in thought and action are familiar to us.

I came across one more common point between the two political thinkers. Recently I spent ten days with research in the *Philologische Bibliothek* of the Freie Universität in Berlin where I found a Commemorative Volume to Romain Rolland published in 1926, containing, among others contributions by the two Indians. The French writer's activity is also well known, especially his relations to Tagore and Gandhi. Rolland was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature two years after Tagore, in 1915. He, too, was a humanist, and a lifelong pacifist, embracing the work of Indian philosophers, and was strongly influenced by Vedanta. In 1923, he wrote a monograph on Gandhi; this is the book Gandhi refers to in his contribution cited below. However, it was not until 1931 that the two men saw each other personally in Switzerland after which they became friends and correspondents. In 1935, on the invitation of Maxim Gorki, Rolland visited Moscow and met also Joseph Stalin. He served unofficially as an ambassador of French artists to the Soviet Union. His relations with Gorki explain that the Russian writer was

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one of the editors of the Memorial Volume.

The book contains some 130 contributions by eminent people from different nations, such as Valentin Bulgakoff, Ernst Curtius, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Selma Lagerlöf, Albert Schweitzer, Upton Sinclair, and others.

Gandhi addressed his felicitation from Satyagrah Ashram (Ahmedabad, see p. 403), and Tagore from Santiniketan (see p. 405).

In the list of contributors we find 9 Indians, e.g. the writer Amya Chandra Chakravarty, and the artist Abindranath Tagore who sent a portrait of Rabindranath (facing p. 348).<sup>2</sup>

Here is first, the shorter bow to Romain Rolland by Gandhi, followed by Tagore's longer tribute. (In the citations below, I retained the exact orthography of the texts).

### GANDHI'S GREETING

"I have purposely refrained from acknowledging your letter all these long weeks, not because there was any unwillingness on my part to contribute my humble quota to the tribute that will be paid by many persons all the world over to the humanitarian work of Romain Rolland. My difficulty was my unfitness to find myself among those men of letters whose contributions you have invited. This is no mock modesty, but my inmost feeling. I am unfit, also, because, I confess, I knew practically nothing about our great and good friend before he imposed upon himself the task of becoming my self-chosen advertizer. And you will be perhaps amazed to know that now, too, my acquaintance with him is confined to a very cursory glance at that booklet regarding myself. The work before me leaves me no time to read the things I would like to. I have, therefore, even now, not been able to read any of his great works. All, therefore, I know about Romain Rolland is what I have learnt from those who have come into personal contact with him. Perhaps it is better that I know him through the living touch of mutual friends. They have enabled me to understand and appreciate the deep humanity of all his acts in every sphere of life. The world is the richer for his life and work. May he be long spared to continue the noble mission of spreading peace among mankind.

*M.K. Gandhi*"

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<sup>2</sup> The number of Hungarian contributors, whether they lived in their country or elsewhere in the world, is unusually high. I quote the names in the form they are found in the Memorial Volume: Babits, Michel, Homme de Lettres, Directeur de «Nyugat» Budapest, Hugai, Ferenc, Directeur de l'Ecole des Beaux Arts de Gyöngyös (Hongrie), Kosztolanyi, Didier, Homme de Lettres, Budapest (Hongrie), Latzko, Andreas, Schriftsteller, Salzburg, Mattyasovsky, Elisabeth, attaché au Secrétariat Hongrois de la Société des Nations, Budapest-Genève, Rakosi, Eugène, Homme de Lettres, ancien Directeur du «Budapesti Hirlap», Membre hon. de l'Académie des Sciences, Budapest (Hongrie), Sikabonyi, Antoine, Hommes de Lettres, Bibliothécaire au Musée National, Budapest. (Hugai, indeed, appears as *Ferenc Hugai et ses collaborateurs* which are: Dóra Káplány, Ida Hofmann, Mme. I. Polgár, Laszló Kovtás).

## AN APPRECIATION TO ROMAIN ROLLAND

While in America I had occasion to talk about the rapid and enormous growth of organizations which attain their irresistible efficiency by eliminating the personal man and concentrating the mechanical one in a huge lump of system. I spoke of the callousness and the deadening of the moral sense of responsibility in consequence of the machine representing man in most of his activities. Cruelty and injustice of an appalling kind have to-day been made easily possible, because they can be done through an organized elemental force which ruthlessly takes a direct path towards the fulfilment of its purpose trampling down all other considerations. We have seen how the church can be blood-thirsty, while the religion it represents is humane; how it is possible to cheat on a wholesale scale in the name of business, while the respectability of the sharers of profit remains untouched; how gross falsehoods are deliberately used for poisoning their victims by governments whose members have gentlemanly manners and traditions. When in loyalty to such gigantic institutions men commit terrible wrongs, they feel something like a religious exultation which smothers their conscience. It is the modern form of fetish worship with its numerous rituals of human sacrifice, in the shadow of which all other religions have faded into unreality. | One of my hearers who was in sympathy with my thoughts asked me how it could be possible to fight these organizations without setting up others in their place. My answer was that my reliance is on those individuals who have made human ideals living in their personality. They may look small and weak by the side of the power they resist, as does a plant by the side of a huge frowning boulder. But the plant has the magic power of life. It gradually creates its own soil with its own constant emanations, and its defeat and death are a prelude to a victorious resurrection. I believe that when anti-human forces spread their dominion, individuals with firm faith in humanity are born, who become acutely conscious of the menace to man and fearlessly fulfil their destiny through insult and isolation. We came to know such a man in England in the person of E. D. Morel who is dead now, but who can never die. When we see them, we know that the living spark of human spirit is not yet extinct and that there is hope. Human civilizations have their genesis in individuals, and they also have their protectors in them. One of the few proofs that the present day is not utterly barren of them is the life and work of Romain Rolland. And that the present day needs him most is proved by the scourging he has received from it, which is a true recognition of his greatness by his fellow-beings. *Rabindranath Tagore*"

Source: *Liber Amicorum Romain Rolland*. Hunc Librum Curaverunt Edendum Maxim Gorki, Georges Duhamel, Stephan Zweig. © 1926 by Rotapfel-Verlag, Zürich und Leipzig.

For Gandhi: p. 155, for Tagore: pp. 348-349.

## APPENDIX

It is a special satisfaction for me to write a notice on the new book *Bridging East and West. Rabindranath Tagore and Romain Rolland. Correspondence (1919–1940)* by Chinmoy Guha (Oxford, University Press 2018) released at the French Embassy in New Delhi on the 5th December, 2018.<sup>3</sup> The book aims to offer the whole of the correspondence between the two writers in English translation together with the letters exchanged between Saumyendranath Tagore (Rabindranath's nephew) and Romain Rolland. It comprises the harvest of a two decades' productive friendship containing also conversations between the two men.

The above *Liber Amicorum* does not seem to be comprised in Guha's corpus, although Gorky, Zweig and Duhamel are quoted (see pp. LV–LVI), and yet, there is one more message by Tagore, a letter in our opinion, the above "Appreciation to Romain Rolland": it is a personal writing.

It is not the place here to review the new book which is likely to be a definitive contribution to the interface between the two cultural icons of the twentieth century. I would like to highlight two points: "[Tagore] replied that there were [...] but very few (perhaps no one [in India]) [who] would accept his ideal of reconciliation between the East the West [...]. Indians, he believed, were passing through an acute nationalist phase [in 1921], their suffering had made them too bitter for a rapprochement with the West, they would certainly not extend their hands to Europe because they believed the Europeans had nothing but suspicions and disdain for them. This is why he had to be very careful about his | dealings with the British and consciously never depended on them to avoid any suspicion about his works as an instrument of the British" (pp. XXIX–XXX).

The present writer does not come from the "West" and is free of any feeling of guilt of the kind. As a Visiting Professor of Classics in India, he made his best to transplant Greek and Latin studies. There is no denial of undeserved sufferings the Indians underwent ever, and one cannot but agree with Tagore when he returned his English knighthood after the Amritsar massacre, yet, his answer looks imprecise ("nothing but suspicions and disdain"). Europeans and the rest of the educated world do admire the Indian tradition on the one hand, and on the other, they did much for India. The present writer encouraged and encourages interested Indians to be at pains to get acquainted with the Classical European (i.e. Graeco–Roman) past, a prerequisite for understanding European and world literature and history, like many Europeans and Americans did the same concerning the classical Indian tradition, Sanskrit studies paramountly comprised. This would be a real "bridge" between the two worlds, having, in any case, nothing harmful for India.

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Sushant Kumar Mishra (French Centre, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) for drawing my attention to the Book Launch which I was lucky to attend.

The second point is that it was not only Tagore and Rolland who wanted to build a bridge between the two worlds in the above sense. Present day Greece has the disadvantage, unlike France, to be a small European country, its writers and thinkers, in the shade of their great antique forefathers, being far less known to the world. Yet, one of its very important poets and thinkers, Angelos Sikelianos (1884–1951), did much for the same goal: within the framework of the "Delphic Idea" set up by himself, he tried, helped significantly by his American wife Eva Palmer, economic help comprised, to build this bridge. Among the many plans were to establish an *international* Delphic University (never realized), and two successful events called "Delphic Games". Tagore and Gandhi were invited but they could not attend. A letter by Tagore preserved in archives in Athens shows that there was connection between the Greek and the Indian poet. Chinmoy Guha mentions Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis and his wife Rani Mahalanobis (Nirmal Kumari), the first being "a main pillar of the Visvabharati" (pp. 30 and 78). I had the occasion elsewhere to publish a photo of the couple standing together with Sikelianos assuming that the couple visited Delphi to get an idea how the Delphic Games would be carried out. Also, I publish a letter by Tagore to the poet Kostis Palamas (1859–1943) in Appendix A where Tagore assures him "we need world poets to-day [...] [a]nd you are such a poet". Much the same would apply to Sikelianos, whereas Kourshed Naoroji, the grand-daughter of the politician Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), writes the best words to Eva Palmer as I was able to confirm it myself in their correspondence in the Sikelianos Archives in Athens, for the help she gave her and the love she showed towards her. Eva Palmer was called by those who knew her "a good angel", and she repeatedly mentions Kourshed as her "good friend", who came to Greece several times, was offered hospitality, and they also studied and played music together. Their friendship dates back to Paris where they first met and realized that they had similar interests in music and art.

A few years later, Tagore was less pessimistic. After a six month journey in Europe in 1926, exhausted but confident, he gave an interview to the Athenian newspaper *Vradini* where he related that he was "favourably impressed" by the European culture, he had detected "spiritual affinity" and "hoped that creation of a new culture between people was possible".<sup>4</sup>

Also, recently I came across a volume of proceedings dedicated to Khushwant Singh where "The East–West Encounter" in one of his works is highlighted.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Details are given by Dimitrios Vassiliades in the Tagore–Festschrift edited by himself (Athens, ELINEPA, 2016, in Greek), on pp. 27 and 47 (fn. 13). On p. 27, Tagore's confession is also quoted: "his mission was to preach love among nations", and "he laboured in his lectures in the cause of world–friendship".

<sup>5</sup> M. Solayan (ed), *Khushwant Sing's Contribution to Journalism, History and Literature*. Karaikudi, Dr. Mohan Educational Publications, 2016, pp. 83 ff. and pp. 290 ff.